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ABSTRACT

Women workers are establishing an identity for themselves in the traditionally male-dominated work world of mechanics, carpenters, construction workers, technicians, and engineers, drawn by incentives ranging from higher pay to training and advancement opportunities. Of the over 12.5 million women employed in industrial and service occupations, over 18% are blue collar workers. The movement of women into nontraditional jobs is relatively new in America, originating on a small scale during World War I and recurring on a much larger scale during World War II. In the period immediately following World War II, the percentage of women in industry declined as they were displaced by returning servicemen. Today, with the support of anti-discrimination legislation, women are re-emerging among blue collar workers. In the mid-1970's women represented about 18% of the 29 million blue collar workers in the United States; almost half a million women were working in skilled occupations. The primary motivating factors for women to seek nontraditional employment include pay equity, readily available training opportunities at community or junior colleges or through apprenticeship programs, increased eligibility for credit based on higher wages, and opportunities for promotion and advancement. While sexism and discrimination present the same problems for today's nontraditional women wokers as they did for their World War II counterparts, major strides have been made in changing attitudes, employment policies, education, and the meaning of male and female work. (EJV)

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NON-TRADITIONAL TRENDS:

WOMEN IN BLUE-COLLAR TRADES

April 1985

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NONTRADITIONAL TRENDS: Women in Blue-Collar Trades

> There is a nobility about hard work. Even the weariness it leaves is exhilarating. Hard work is not hard work to the enthusiast. It is intoxicating. The privations. The hardships. The long days and long nights. All are worth the price, and the price is worth it--results and success. To win requires hard work and iron resolution. And supreme effort and self-sacrifice. The power of work and the sense of duty brings no greater joy in life.
>
> Jerold Panas

Women have always worked. Paid or unpaid, they are no strangers to the hardships of long hours or strenuous labor. Women are well acquainted with work's challenges and rewards. Their participation in the workforce has grown to such an extent that their experiences and contributions to the economy can no longer be regarded as unimportant.

Women entering the workforce today face a constellation of choices and alternatives in traditional and nontraditional work roles. In "sex appropriate" roles, those of secretary, nurse, service or domestic worker, and teacher, a reassuring sense of identity has historically drawn women away from nontraditional roles. Social pressures and labor trends have contributed further to the division between male and female job markets. Today that is changing as more women gravitate toward occupations that will offer them the monetary as well as personal rewards which are not always available in traditional women's jobs. Nontraditional women workers are establishing an identity for themselves in the male-dominated work world of mechanics, carpenters, construction workers, technicians, and engineers. For many of them, the blue-collar sector is ripe with incentives,

ranging from higher pay to training and advancement opportunities. Of the over 12.5 million women employed in industrial and service occupations today, over 18 percent are blue-collar workers.

The movement of women into nontraditional jobs is relatively new in America, originating on a small scale during World War I and recurring on a much larger scale with the influx of women into industry during World War II. For the first time, women were admitted to the urban industrial working class to fulfill an obligation to their country. With the increase in war production and the scarcity of male workers, the need for an alternate work force was evident. Many women were forced to work because they had lost their family's wage earner. The availability of new jobs encouraged women who, for long periods after the depression, were unable to find work. Likewise, poorly paid female service workers, domestics, and sweatshop workers also gained access to more remunerative industrial jobs previously open only to men. The number of women employed in manufacturing industries more than doubled during the war years, especially in war industries. In heavy industry, the female work force rose steadily, from 340,000 to over 2 million. Women assumed without exception the diverse work roles formerly held by men. In a relatively short period of time, they proved that they were fully capable of nontraditional industrial and skilled labor.

When returning servicemen sought to regain their industrial jobs after the war, these women were forced to return to their previous employment, homemaking, or unemployment. Their

displacement was generally supported by employers, unions, and the government which regarded women as temporary fill-ins for the male workers. The withdrawal of federal funds for child care centers intensified pressure on women to relinquish their jobs. Of the 3,102 facilities that had offered care to 1.5 million children at the end of the war, 2,800 were closed.

The World War II shift in employment signified that women were adequately prepared to perform skilled and semi-skilled physical labor and technical jobs that had previously been identified as exclusive to men. It helped to obscure somewhat the boundary between what was considered appropriate male and female work roles. Most important, it dispelled myths that women cannot do men's work; women are more frequently absent than men; women have a high job turnover; and that women allow marriage and children to interfere with employment.

Men reacted strongly to the intrusion of women into their sacrosanct domain, despite the fact that the additional work force was demanded at the time. Being a woman in a man's world was indeed a challenge for these pioneer nontraditional workers. Adapting to heavy physical labor, new surroundings, a coarser environment, and hostile or nonsupportive attitudes of co-workers were typical barriers to be overcome. Women were paid less than men because of the erroneous assumption that they could not do the heavier jobs. They were often forced to adhere to stricter safety requirements. They were not promoted as frequently as men and were told that after the war was over they would not be needed. In their grease-stained cover-alls and hard hats they

were regarded as freaks by female counterparts who retained their traditional work roles.

In the period immediately following the war, the percentage of women in industry declined, but the actual number of women in these jobs increased because the total number of women working rose dramatically. The proportion of women in blue-collar jobs dropped from 21 percent in 1950 to 16 percent in 1974, but their numbers increased by more than a million to 5.3 million. Yet, by the mid-1970's, only about 2 percent of all employed women were holding jobs in the skilled trades.

Today, as women continue to enter the work force in increasing numbers, a trend toward nontraditional employment is growing out of their personal need to survive and earn a decent income in an inflationary society. The average annual wage of women is still far below that of men, largely due to the fact that women workers are concentrated in low paying, dead-end jobs. Fortunately, with the support of late 1960's and 1970's civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination in hiring, the blue-collar woman is re-emerging. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, between 1970 and 1980, the percentage of women with children under 18 who held paid jobs grew from 41 to 55 percent. Working mothers have been the fastest growing component of the job market for some time. In the mid-1970's, women represented about 18 percent of the 29 million blue-collar workers in America. Women joined the labor force throughout the 70's at an average of over one million annually. While most women found employment in traditionally female occupations, many were making

footholds in the growing industrial arena. In 1970, almost half a million women were working in skilled occupations, up from 277,000 in 1960. The rate of increase in these occupations was twice that for women in all other occupations and eight times the rate of increase for men in the skilled trades. The number of working mothers has increased more than tenfold since the period immediately following World War II.

Women today face a changing world marked by a decrease in family size, an increase in female-headed families, and a greater likelihood of full-time rather than part-time employment. A large percentage of women will work during their childbearing years. The number of women working is expected to reach 50 million in 1985. Department of Labor figures show that 43 percent of all women working today are not married and must work to support themselves. Over 75 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 are expected to participate in the work force in the 1980's. Furthermore, this department forecast that a girl born in 1950 had an expected work life of 15 years whereas a girl born in 1970 could look forward to about 23 years of work. The lengthening of women's involvement in the work force reflects the increasing need for self-support and family maintenance. Today, the single-parent family with women as heads of families is a growing trend. In 1977, nearly 1 out of 7 families was headed by a woman. In 1980, over half of all married women were working. This accounted for 44.6 million women. A norm of the past is that of the single-earner, husband-supported family with 2 children. It represents less than 2 percent of husband-wife families in America today.

Once oddities, women with lifelong commitments to careers are today the norm. Women who find themselves in nontraditional careers such as engineers, mechanics, construction workers, and plumbers discover that the male-dominated work forces differ greatly from the female-dominated in wage earnings. One of the primary motivating factors for women to seek nontraditional employment is pay equity. Pay has consistently been a startling example of inequality in male and female employment over the long term. In 1939, women's median earnings in the experienced labor force were 58 percent of men's. By 1981, they had risen to only 59 percent of the median earnings for men. In 1974, a woman with 4 years of college had a lower income than a man with an 8th grade education, and she earned 57 cents to every dollar earned by a man. In 1984, women professionals earned 75 cents to the male dollar. According to projected 1985 median incomes, a Trade and Industrial supervisor will receive an average annual income of $19,000 compared to a traditionally female secretarial position which will average only $10,000. Although women today account for over 44 percent of the work force, 80 percent work in traditional female low-paying jobs and a third of these are in the poverty group. The reality is that mechanics, welders, painters, and tool-and-die makers earn far more than cashiers, waitresses, and secretaries.

Training and advancement opportunities are other incentives for women to enter blue-collar skilled trades. Training requirements for trades occupations are generally lower than those for white-collar professions and involve usually a maximum

of 2 years of technical training at the community college or junior college level. There are over 1,200 two-year educational institutes in the U.S. and at least one community college in 426 of the 435 congressional districts, many of which offer courses in skilled occupations. These institutes offer a variety of programs leading to the associate degree, and short-term training leading to specialized certificates and diplomas. Most vocational/technical training programs are designed to lead directly to employment. On-the-job training is also available in many blue-collar fields, and some programs are geared specifically to women in nontraditional jobs.

Apprenticeship training is appealing to women who cannot return to school full-time but who wish to acquire skills in trade areas. A woman can begin apprenticeship training with no experience and earn an income, usually higher than in traditional female jobs, while receiving classroom and on-the-job training. Apprentices start out earning 50 percent of a full journeyman's wage. As they gain more skills and experience, wages rise progressively, usually to 90 percent of a journeyman's wage. Within 4 to 6 years, a woman can achieve journeyman status and earn anywhere from $13 to $18 per hour or higher. Certain federal programs encourage women to enter the nontraditional job market in order to meet Equal Employment Opportunity requirements. In Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the Federal Women's Program provides apprenticeship training in 17 trade areas ranging from fabric worker, ship fitter, and sheet metal worker to electrician and welder. The program consists of 4 years'

training, combining work with classroom study. This program is also working to increase the number of women in mid- and upper-management positions.

The Federal Work Incentive Program (WIN) was designed to provide employment and social services to enable recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to move from welfare to work. One project involved an 18 to 21-month electronics technician training program that had a 90 percent placement record at an average starting salary of over $10,000. Apprenticeship programs were expanded to allow women to enter skilled trades, and by 1977 there were women apprentices in 200 out of 450 occupations recognized as apprenticeable by the Department of Labor. The Office of Federal Contract Compliance set a goal for construction companies with federal contracts to hire 102,000 women by 1979 and another 230,000 by 1980.

Despite U.S. government support of women in nontraditional employment, it is still the only major industrialized nation with no family policy, no government-supported child care except for the very poor, and no help for parents beyond a few income tax deductions. In 1977, 5.3 million working mothers had 6.4 million preschool children under the age of 6. Less than a million of these children were enrolled in licensed day care centers. Many women believe that their opportunities or their ability to cope with the dual responsibilities of home and career are hampered by the lack of day-care facilities.

Credit eligibility constitutes yet another incentive for women to earn better salaries. According to a 1974 publication

entitled "HUD Challenge," the right to obtain credit was affected by both the typically low wages women earned and the sort of jobs they held. Even today, most banks assume women will fail to advance as far in their jobs as men and will have less earning potential. Lending institutions regard a woman's salary as a supplement to her husband's wages. At the time of this 1974 publication, a woman's income would only be counted for credit if she signed an affidavit that she was practicing birth control under the supervision of a physician or if she was unable to have children. The article emphasized that even if the woman was financially independent, most lending institutions would require her to have a male co-signer. Fortunately, with the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 and its amended version of 1975, lenders were prohibited from considering sex or marital status in judging an applicant's worthiness to receive credit. After November 1976, wives were given credit ratings separate from those of their husbands. Also, it forbade lenders to ask a woman about her birth control practices or childbearing plans.

Besides financial, promotional, and training advantages inherent in most blue-collar occupations, there are other reasons for women to seek nontraditional employment. Many do not find women's work interesting or challenging enough. Contrary to popular opinions that women dislike "dirty" or physical work, many enjoy it and are good at it. Nontraditional women workers like their jobs because they are physical, free, outdoors in some cases, and because they involve teamwork and working with men. They derive a feeling of accomplishment that is not always found

in female jobs. They seek in their work what men have been finding all along--feelings of competence, of being productive, of making a contribution, and of being in control of their time and energy. In their pioneering effort, they find in blue-collar employment a departure from the routine and mundane work so characteristic of conventional, non-professional female occupations.

Not all women are equipped to perform manual labor. Neither are all men. Women, however, are finding that certain aptitudes predispose them to successfully accomplish tasks requiring manual and finger dexterity, motor coordination, and eye-hand coordination. They tend to have greater endurance, flexibility, and lower-body strength than men. Though at an upper-body strength disadvantage relative to men, they are able to compensate through training with weights and physical exercise. Most health experts feel that the average female will never be as strong as the average male, yet the disadvantage this poses in heavy construction is largely offset by modern technological advances designed to reduce overly demanding physical strength tasks.

Attitudes are changing as many more women enter the skilled trades and create an identity for themselves. The image of the tough, foul-mouthed, masculinized female construction worker is becoming less of a stereotype as women fit into these jobs and retain their femininity. This is not to say that the old stereotypes and patronizing attitudes are less of a concern today. Sexism and discrimination present problems for today's nontraditional woman worker as they did for their World War II

predecessors. But the response to such injustices is by no means weak or ineffectual as in the past. Legislation, though not specifically intended to address issues in nontraditional employment, has reinforced the position of women in terms of civil rights and employment equity. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in all aspects of employment, including hiring, firing, promotions, training, fringe benefits, seniority, and retirement on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 prohibited employers from discriminating on the basis of sex in paying wages for equal work on jobs requiring equal skills and responsibilities and similar working conditions.

Sexual harassment on the job is no longer considered a "personal problem" for women but an employment issue. Policies on sexual harassment demand much attention today with the increasing sensitivity to women's rights on the job. Discriminatory treatment or sexually offensive behavior that emphasizes a woman's sex role over her function as a worker is no longer tolerable.

Perhaps the most dramatic influence on the acceptance of women in nontraditional employment is the women workers themselves. Today's labor force sees a new breed of confident, competent, and determined women who are turning work's feminine mystique upside down. Career Education counselors and nontraditional role models are encouraging women to consider vocational alternatives such as nontraditional training and employment. The labor forecasts indicate that many jobs will be

available to women in the skilled trades and by 1990, anywhere from 54 to 60 percent of all women will hold jobs outside the home.

Women who cross occupational boundaries to enter nontraditional work forces are part of a wave of the future. They are pioneers and risk-takers who are revolutionizing the work world and changing the meaning of male and female work. The impact of their revolution is felt in society, in the home, and in the way women perceive themselves as workers and as human beings. Perhaps in the near future there will be no need for terminology such as "nontraditional." Women and men will share equal status and involvement in the work world.

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